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A Great Source for Healthy Produce

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Community gardens provide fresh produce of the season more accessible to those who don't have a farm in their backyard.

Summer is here, and with it comes the bounty of the season: fresh, flavorful, locally grown fruits and vegetables.

Enjoy the Season's Bounty

July is Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center (NMCPHC) and its Health Promotion and Wellness (HPW) department's fruits and vegetables month, as such, we're highlighting ways to get the best produce on your plate.

Recent revivals of centuries-old practices are making the fresh produce of the season more accessible to those of us who don't have a farm in our backyard. And what is even better, the [Healthy Base Initiative](#) (HBI) is supporting these practices, making it easier for us to get them started.

We're talking about community gardens and farmers markets. These markets have grown in popularity in recent years, much because of their ability to improve access to healthy foods; one of the keys to getting people to eat healthier and make lifestyle changes.

"The more convenient you can make it and the more access you give people, the more likely they are to engage in that particular behavior," says Bethany Sweatman, Defense Logistics Agency (DLA).

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Many military communities, spurred by the HBI, are beginning to recognize the benefits of gardens and farmers markets, and have begun developing these programs to increase the accessibility and affordability of fruits and vegetables for families of active duty and retired service members.

An example is DLA’s farmers market on Fort Belvoir, which offers access and convenience to employees and visitors.

“When you have a farmers market that is selling fresh produce literally right in front of you on your way into work, it just can’t get any more convenient than that.” says Sweatman. “It serves as a visual cue to prompt healthy behavior.”

The community garden at Naval Health Clinic New England, likewise is improving access and convenience, and strives to educate signed up enlisted service members that receive the free produce, including recipes.

“There’s nothing more satisfying than participating in the community garden on the grounds, and reaping the fruits of that labor,” says Patricia Booth, a nurse educator involved in the volunteer-run community garden.

Top Three Reasons to get produce from a Garden or Market

- 1. Freshness/Taste: Although it’s hard to describe aptly in words, there is something so incredibly special about the taste of fresh produce. Free of most pesticides and picked mere hours before being sold, the produce is robust and bursting with flavor that is simply unparalleled to what you can find in a supermarket. Simply stated: it tastes better!
- 2. Knowing where your food comes from: Getting your produce from a community garden or farmers market gives you the benefit of full disclosure regarding your food; you know exactly what farm it came from, can ask the farmer about their growing methods, and when it was picked. In many cases, the produce you’ll receive was picked just hours before becoming available.
- 3. Increased variety: Farmers markets and gardens often have a variety of produce that is unmatched in most grocery stores. You may even find something that you have never heard of before, for Beth Sweatman its kohlrabi, a mild, slightly sweet root vegetable similar in consistency to cauliflower or broccoli stalks. Part of the fun and enjoyment of a farmers market is the new and unique things that you can find on a weekly basis. Add variety into your palette and make eating fruits and vegetables fun.

Tips for Getting Produce from a Farmers Market or Community Garden

Farmers markets and community gardens can be somewhat intimidating the first time you go to one. But really, they’re quite simple. Here are some tips to help you grow or shop like a regular.

If you want produce from a garden, just ask: Find out who runs the community garden near you, and ask how you can get involved. Some are cash and carry, others may ask you to contribute supplies or do some weeding, but most are willing to work with whatever your wallet or schedule can handle.



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Don't be afraid to interact with the farmers/vendors: If you have a question about what a particular item is, such as how to tell if an item is ripe or how in the world you would possibly cook it, don't be afraid to ask the farmer. They are a wealth of knowledge and often have cooking and recipe suggestions.

Know what's in season: Part of the beauty of gardens and farmers markets is that each season brings with it a variety of different fruits and vegetables. Doing a simple search online for a general time frame of when specific items will be in season will help you know what to expect to find when you head to your local farmers market. Be sure to ask the vendors or growers what they have new each week and what they plan to have coming soon.

Go early: In the world of farmers markets and gardens, it's true that the early bird gets the worm. Hot commodities tend to go fast, so if there is something in particular that you are looking to get your hands on, call dibs early, or shop closer to when the market opens as opposed to waiting until later in the day.

Don't be fooled: Just because you found it at the market doesn't automatically mean that it is healthy or good for you. This comes into play particularly when there are bakeries and ready-to-eat foods available.

A general word of caution: A cookie, even if found at a farmers market and made with fresh ingredients, is still a cookie. It's something you can and absolutely should enjoy as a part of a balanced lifestyle, but bear in mind that the calories and sugar don't magically disappear because you found it at a farmers market.

Finding Fresh Produce

If your installation or community doesn't yet have a farmer's market or community garden, chances are there might be one nearby. If not, check out the feasibility of setting one up.

Booth recommends that you start by scouting out potential locations to determine whether it's possible to establish a community garden.

You'll need to find a spot with good light and drainage. The size of the plot will also determine what and how much you'll be able to grow. Then find others who are knowledgeable and interested in supporting the effort, and check out what it will take to stand one up. Each community will have different rules and regulations, so make sure you find out and do what needs to be done.

Want to learn more about how to start a garden? Go to: www.letsmove.gov/gardening-guide.

Then, get to eating! For more information on healthy eating, please visit NMCPHC's [Healthy Eating](#) webpage.